

THE BEST METHOD IN EFL/ESL TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the notion of best method in L2 teaching which has nowadays become a perplexing problem for many language teachers and experts who are engaged in TESOL, ESL or EFL domains and see if there really is a best method which yields best learning outcomes in terms of learning a foreign language. At the outset, I shall define the key concepts; methods, approaches and techniques and show the relationship existing among them with reference to literature that deals with SLA. I then briefly discuss and describe the available methods with emphasis on their strengths and weaknesses in the light of current views of L2 learning and teaching processes citing examples where necessary. Finally, I argue as to why an L2 teacher constantly needs to change the methods and techniques (classroom activities) while he/she is engaged in teaching operation in order to prove that there is no single method which is best for everyone and that our pursue for a best method seems a myth.

KEYWORDS: Method, Procedure, Approach, Technique, Principled Eclecticism, Plausibility, Principle, Proficiency, Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

It is no wonder even in our day-to-day life related activities; we tend to look for a best method to carry out a given task. This appears to be an innate nature of human beings who are gifted with the ability of thinking and perceiving things in advance as to how a task or a series of tasks need to be done using the best possible way with the available resources. When it comes to teaching an additional language, a teacher may tend to look for an effective and result-oriented method which could be applied in a language classroom with the assumption that the method/s he or she employs will ultimately help learners acquire the target language with ease. As language teachers, we are very much concerned about teaching methods, approaches and techniques because we need to employ most effective methodology in teaching so that we will be able to help our learners to achieve their objectives in learning a foreign language.

Method, Approach and Technique

According to Richard et al. (1992, p. 228), a method, in language teaching, is “a way of teaching a language which is based on systematic principles and procedures” and approach is termed as “different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learnt” while the technique refers to different kinds of classroom activities based on different methods. Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. xii) states that a method “is a coherent set of links between principles and certain techniques and procedures”, while Prabhu (1990, p. 162) observes that a method is “a set of activities to be carried out in the classroom and to the theory, belief, or plausible concept that informs those activities”.

Moreover, Richards and Rodgers (1986) define method as an umbrella term which specifies the relationship between theory and classroom practice. According to them, “a method is theoretically related to approach, is

organizationally determined by a design, and is practically realized in procedure” (p. 20). It seems that Richards and Rodgers (1986) provide a comprehensive meaning to the method which appears to encompass approach, design and procedure.

The definitions provided by Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Prabhu (1990) to method are the same in that they both refer to the same concept in general. Larsen-Freeman observes that there is a coherent set of links between actions and thoughts in language teaching. The actions are the techniques and the thoughts are the principles. It is true that a language teacher should have thoughts about his/her subject matter, learners and the culture in which the language is taught as well as the thoughts about the teacher himself/herself concerning what he/she can do to help learners to learn. Concerning the links between thoughts and actions, Larsen-Freeman (2000) argues that one thought-in-action links another and thus a method is a coherent set of such links in the sense that there should be some theoretical or philosophical compatibility among the links. To illustrate the idea stated above, an example can be presented from a lesson I conducted with my non-English major undergraduate students in a university in Thailand. The topic of the lesson was ‘Your Health’. In a previous lesson, the students studied about various types of health issues and ailments and how to describe them to a doctor. Therefore, the next day, the lesson was ‘The doctor visit’ in which students were first required to make an appointment to see a doctor in a clinic on the phone. According to the instruction provided in the book, the students should first listen and repeat the recorded dialogue. So I allowed them to do so. Generally, they listen and repeat two to three times. If we analyze this activity, from the point of methodological view, we come to know that this kind of activity is linked to Audio-lingual method which was based on behavioral psychology.

The underlying principle of Audio-lingual method states that acquisition of a language is acquisition of a set of habits. Although this method has been subjected to heavy criticism, it has not left the ELT domain yet since it has some good points for L2 learners to grasp. If my teaching context, as indicated above, is examined in detail, I should know the principle why students repeat words/ phrases or sentences several times. It is assumed the more of something is repeated, the stronger the habit and the greater the learning is (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). After the first step in which I allowed the students to repeat the lines of a given dialogue, I moved to the next step in which they were required to perform a role play. I explained the activity and asked them to get into pairs and prepare a short a conversation which would take place between a patient and a receptionist in a clinic (to make an appointment to see a doctor). As they were adult learners, they knew the procedure involved in making an appointment to see a doctor on the phone. When they were ready, I asked them to present their role-plays before the class because I knew the principle which lies behind role-playing activities. In other words, I know that learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication, which is one of the core principles of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As I had planned previously, when this activity continued for some time which allowed students to master some linguistic structures required for this function, I next told the class that I was going to change the activity a little bit and asked a few students to help me arrange the classroom in such a way that it looked like a small town with roads and buildings and other landmarks. We put chairs back to back and created a few streets in which some buildings were named as bank, post office, medical clinic, and restaurant.

The setting in the classroom consisted of one main road, two intersections and four cross roads. I then told my students that in real world situations, we may have to ask for directions to certain places we want to go and we should know how to ask for and give directions. After that, I told my students to imagine that the patient does not know where the clinic is so he/she has to ask for directions to get there. Later, I put them into groups of three. Now each group has a

patient, a receptionist, and a local resident who has to direct the patient to the clinic. Before the activity began, I asked the class what phrases they could use when they want to ask for or give directions. Some of them came up with phrases such as 'go straight, turn right/left. This led me to think that they know the language needed for asking for and giving direction in real-world situations. I helped them with some more phrases such as 'Go straight along this road and then turn right at the first intersection'. I wrote some on the white board so that they could refer to them if any problem arose. Finally, they were asked to do the task and I observed them enjoying it very much since it involved physical responses as if it happened in real life. As indicated earlier, one may come to know that one cannot strictly stick to one method, approach or a technique when teaching because learning is a dynamic process which has to deal with living beings. In doing this activity, I had to employ not only CLT but also Total Physical Response (TPR) which is said to be based on the comprehension approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) initiated by James Asher (1977) who views that beginning foreign language instruction should address the right hemisphere of the brain, the part which control non-verbal behavior, the target language should be presented in chunks, not just word by word.

In order to clarify the scenario discussed above in more details, I first to refer to Prabhu (1990) who explicitly discusses the notion that 'there is no best method' under three explanations based on the term method: (a) Different methods are best for different teaching contexts; (b) that all methods are partially true or valid; and (c) that the notion of good and bad methods is itself misguided. In this explanation, Prabhu asserts that no single method is best for everyone is also to say that different methods are best for different people or for different teaching contexts. As noted above, Prabhu's claim that 'there is no best method' seems acceptable because there are a number of variables which involve in the teaching context that influences what is best. According to Prabhu, they are factors relating to social situations, organizational factors, teacher and learner related factors.

Moreover, Prabhu (1990) argues that what is best depends on whom the method is for, in what circumstances, for what purposes. For example, suppose we are going to teach a group of young children aged 6-7, who are not cognitively matured enough to understand certain linguistic features of the target language, the best approach would be to use TPR which, according to Asher, is the fastest, least stressful way to achieve understanding of any target language. However, TPR may not work with adults or adolescents in the same way to the same degree as it does with young learners. If we are going to teach a group of learners who are going to appear for an international or a local examination where they have to show their language proficiency in reading and writing skills, we are forced to change our teaching contexts depending on the learners', institution or parents' needs although we want to teach all competencies to make them proficient users of the target language. Furthermore, despite the fact that the teacher wishes to employ any effective teaching method that he perceives will yield effective learning outcomes, if the learners show a lethargic attitude, disinterest or a resistance towards it, again the teacher will be helpless. Evidence in support of the view that learner resistance or lethargic attitudes can be cited from empirical studies conducted in Korea, China, Japan, and Pakistan. Defeng (1998) reports some teacher perceived difficulties in introducing CLT in South Korea. Similar situations have been reported from China, Japan and Pakistan where learners have shown some sort of resistance to CLT. The reason for displaying a kind of resistance to CLT can be ascribed to the fact that those learners have been learning in a traditional setting for many years and students rely on the teacher to give them information directly and in a situation like the one described above, it is difficult for the teacher to get the students to participate in class activities. However, from my own experience with Thai students, I can assert that Thai students do not show any form of resistance to CLT or a mixed method as long as it keeps them enjoyable.

Considering the second notion as stated by Prabhu (1990, p. 161) that “all methods are partially true or valid”, one can assert that each method one uses in the classroom teaching has its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, let us consider Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in which the students are taught pre-selected, pre-sequenced linguistic structure (grammar rules and vocabulary) through form-focused exercises until they internalize the rule of the target language. Then, they are given a chance to apply the rules they have learnt (Kumaravadevelu, 1994). In GTM, mostly students’ exercises are based on translation from the target language to the first language of the learners or vice versa. Therefore, given the factors stated above regarding GMT, one may tend to think what strengths this method entails. There are some advantages in GMT. GMT allows learners to engage in a number of cognitive skills in doing varied types of exercises such as translation from one language to another, studying grammar rules and new vocabulary. It is interesting to note that many research findings indicate that meaning-focused instruction is not adequate for developing all aspects of communicative competence (Harly, 1989; Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Day & Shapson, 1991). Consequently, we find that GTM has some weaknesses too. The major weakness is that the GTM pays less or no attention to speaking and listening skills although they are considered to be important skills in communication. Furthermore, GTM is teacher dominated and students receive no opportunity to interact between or among their peers when they are engaged in classroom activities. In addition, in GTM, the native language of the learners is highly used while grammar rules are taught deductively and this involves a lot of memorization of the rules which generally becomes a tedious task for the learner. Likewise, if the Direct or Audio-lingual method is seen from the pedagogical perspective, one may find that those methods include both strengths and weaknesses. This might be the possible reason why Prabhu stresses that all methods are partially true or valid as unhelpful.

Returning to Prabhu’s, (1990, p. 161) third statement, “The notion of good and bad method is itself misguided” Prabhu argues that a prevalent notion of the best method is that it is the method that yields the best results in terms of learning outcomes. He further points out that in order to find out the best method, one has to judge the amount of learning it can lead to in a given period of time. To do this, one has to compare the teaching methods and learning outcomes which involves scientific enquiry which is practically impossible.

Holliday (1997), also questions whether CLT, which has developed within the commercially oriented institutions of Britain, Australia and North America, can work in under-resourced parts of the developing world or where other educational issues are involved. Whitely (1993) doubts whether CLT actually become established in the classroom and whether a significant shift towards CLT has taken place. Given the arguments advanced by authors such as Holliday (1997) and Whitley (1993) concerning the possible constraints involved in CLT, it can be argued that a better solution left for an EFL teacher is to strike a balance between the correct amount and kind of input that should be provided to the students by an EFL teacher in the class.

Which Teaching Method is Best?

When analyzing all methods from different perspectives, one may find that there is some truth to every method since there are some similarities and differences among them. Because of the so-called similarities and differences found in every method, an EFL teacher may find it problematic to choose a best method among them. As indicated by Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 181) that which leads for a particular teachers to decide “which method is best” is the fact that a particular method resonates with their values, experience, and fundamental views about teaching and learning. However, we find that each method has its own strengths and weaknesses in a way that it is not equally suited for all situations as

well as for all learners. Therefore, it is suggested that EFL teachers who subscribe to the pluralistic view of methods can pick and choose from among methods to create their own blend, then, their practice is said to be eclectic. However, if EFL teachers who have a consistent philosophy and pick in accordance with it is said to be principled eclecticism. In other words, teachers create their own method by blending aspects of other methods in a principled manner. However, this does not mean that a teacher should practice activities without knowing the principles which lie behind them. A teacher should know why he/she does and what he/she does in the classroom. This view is advocated by Prabhu (1990, p. 168) who asserts that “an eclectic blending that constitutes a form of pedagogic understanding at least offer us an additional method, though it makes an unjustified claim to being more than an additional method”.

Teacher’s Sense of Plausibility

On substantiating the claim that there is no best method, Prabhu (1990, p. 168) clarifies that teaching methods should be judged by the amounts of learning they can lead to, in a given period of time and also we are cautioned that a method should not be mechanically followed with no sense of understanding or identification of it. One needs to have a subjective understanding of the teaching one does. This is where an EFL teacher’s personal conceptualization occurs. This means that a teacher’s conceptualization may arise from a number of different sources, including his/her experience in the past as a learner. In other words, I would say that I studied English as a second language so when I was learning English, we used a class textbook prepared by the Ministry of Education in my country (Sri Lanka). It was mostly based on reading comprehension activities on selected topics. The typical format of an English textbook that was written to be used in the classroom during 1970s in Sri Lanka followed structural method. i.e.

The lesson began with an explanation of the particular structure used in the text. Some examples were given concerning the different structural patterns used in the subsequent passage. Next, students practiced making some more sentences with different meanings using the same structural patterns given in tables. After that, students were asked to read the text individually according to the teacher’s call. As a second language learner, we were encouraged loud reading with the teacher’s correction if a word was mispronounced. Then, our English teacher explained the meaning of the text in our native language (Sinhala) and the lesson thus continued until the exercises based on the given lesson were completed. Most of the exercises consisted of blank filling, completion items, multiple choice items, joining isolated sentences plus answering to comprehension questions. No listening or speaking was encouraged. Those days our teachers did not teach us anything outside the textbook. As a result of this fixed pattern into which many of us were exposed, we could gain a good understanding of the structural patterns of language and developed reading and writing skills to a sound degree, but we were at a disadvantage when it came to use the language in real world situations because we were taught book language not the spoken language relevant to social situations.

The next important point I need to consider is my earlier experience of teaching, exposure to one or more methods while training as a teacher, what I know or think of other teachers’ actions and opinions, and my experience as a parent. As Prabhu (1990) has indicated that the concept of how learning takes place and how teaching supports it is called a teacher’s sense of plausibility about teaching. This is to clarify that when a teacher’s sense of plausibility is engaged in the teaching operation that can be said to be involved, and the teaching is not to be mechanical. Furthermore, when the sense of plausibility is engaged, the task of teaching is so productive that it helps learners to become involved in activities with the building up of a good learner-teacher rapport, which is thought to be a healthy condition in a language classroom and also enhance learning. A teacher’s sense of plausibility does not deal with whether it implies a good or a bad method but,

whether it is active, alive or operational to create a sense of involvement for both the teachers and the students. In this dimension, we find that a teacher's sense of plausibility is an important aspect of teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it can be stated that in one's teaching, one needs to employ the principled eclecticism as indicated by Larsen-Freeman (2000) because a teacher can understand that listening and repeating a dialogue will help his students to learn some phonological aspects of speech such as correct pronunciation, stress and intonation but exposing learners only to activities of this kind does not guarantee that they will be able to improve their communicative skills in the target language. Therefore, an EFL teacher's task is to equip learners with communicative competence so that they will be able to use the language not only inside the classroom but also outside of it to fulfill their linguistic needs. Finally, it is hoped that this brief discussion concerning the methods in EFL/ESL teaching will provide EFL/ESL teachers with comprehensive understanding to dispel the myth of the existence of best method in the ESL/EFL domain.

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